

2d ex-aide says Bush was warned about Noriega

By Tom Fiedler
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WASHINGTON — George Bush's former chief of staff told a Senate subcommittee in July that the vice president was apprised in "face-to-face" CIA briefings as long as five years ago that the intelligence agency suspected Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega of laundering drug money.

The testimony of retired Adm. Daniel Murphy, which has not been previously reported, raises new questions about when Bush learned of Noriega's connections to the drug trade.

Those questions arose anew yesterday in a British television documentary focusing on Noriega's alleged involvement in the drug trade. A former senior aide to Noriega, Col. Roberto Diaz Herrera, said on the broadcast that Bush complained to Noriega, during a meeting in December 1983, about the laundering of drug money.

Bush insisted during the GOP primary campaign that last February's indictment of Noriega was the first indication he had of the Panamanian military leader's criminal activities.

But in May, Bush amended that position after revelations that he had attended the December 1983 meeting during which the subject of drug trafficking was raised, and a second meeting in 1985 in which Noriega drug activities were alluded to by the U.S. ambassador to Panama.

Bush campaign aides yesterday denied that Bush had discussed money-laundering with Noriega, although they confirmed that Bush attended the December 1983 meeting with Noriega and other Panamanian officials at the airport in Panama City. Craig Fuller, Bush's current chief of staff, said that Bush had raised the subject of drug-money laundering, but with other officials, not with Noriega.

Murphy's testimony, given to the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on terrorism, narcotics and international communications, may be the strongest yet suggesting that Bush had been made aware of Noriega's suspected involvement in the drug trade as long as five years ago.

Murphy, now a Washington-based consultant, was the vice president's top aide from January 1981 to April 1985. His duties included coordinating the activities of the South Florida Task Force on drug smuggling, which Bush headed. Murphy did not respond to a request for comment yesterday.

Murphy told the Senate panel on July 14 that he was present during "face-to-face briefings of the CIA men and the vice president." Bush headed the CIA in 1976, and Murphy served as his deputy director of intelligence.

Asked by Sen. Brock Adams (D., Wash.) if the CIA briefing officers provided them with evidence that Noriega was engaged in laundering drug profits, Murphy replied: "It was suspected that Noriega was laundering money."

"I don't recall any evidence where [the briefing officer] would say there was definitely money-laundering going on, but it was suspected," Murphy said.

"It was suspected at the time in the Caymans and probably Panama and it was definitely suspected in the Bahamas," he said.

Murphy was careful in his testimony to separate money-laundering activities from drug transshipments and said that Panama had a "very high reputation in the fight against drugs." He also indicated that neither he nor Bush attached significance to the Noriega allegations because of Panama's cooperation in stopping drug shipments at sea.

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____

The Chicago Tribune _____
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"I would have not had this impression if we had intelligence that Noriega was this bum" involved in the drug trade, Murphy said.

The issue of what Bush knew of Noriega's drug profiteering and when he may have known it has troubled his candidacy since Noriega's indictment by two federal grand juries in Florida in February.

Democratic presidential candidate Michael S. Dukakis has pointed to the Noriega case as an example of Bush's mismanagement of the administration's drug war.

Last May, another senior Bush aide, Donald P. Gregg, said in a deposition that Bush had been told on Dec. 16, 1985, of Noriega's possible involvement in the drug trade. Gregg, the vice president's national security adviser, testified under oath that Bush was told by then-U.S. Ambassador Everett Briggs that Noriega "was a growing problem politically, militarily and possibly in the drug area."

Gregg also testified that Bush had been told by Panamanian President Ricardo de la Espriella at the December 1983 airport meeting that published reports in the Miami Herald about suspected involvement of top-level Panamanian officials in the drug trade "aren't true." Gregg quoted Bush as replying: "I wasn't aware of them. If I had been, I would have raised them with you."

The deposition prompted Bush to qualify his earlier statements that he had had no hint of Noriega's possible involvement in drug trafficking until February, when he was indicted by two federal grand juries. Press aide Peter Teeley told reporters in May that what Bush had meant was that he hadn't seen any "concrete evidence" of Noriega's involvement — leaving open the possibility that Bush had heard unverified reports.